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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF CURRENT INTELLIGENCE
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COMMENT ON REPORTED PURGE OF EAST GERMAN
MINISTER OF JUSTICE

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According to the East German news agency, Max Fechner, the East German Justice Minister, has been fired by Premier Grotewohl for "activity hostile to the state" and replaced by Hilde Benjamin, Vice President of the East German Supreme Court.

A long-time Socialist, Fechner joined Grotewohl and others in merging his party with the communists to form the Socialist Unity Party in 1946. As his reward for this collaboration he received the justice portfolio in the East German government. Like Grotewohl, Fechner has been an opportunist who was willing to follow the communist line. He is generally credited with having replaced a large part of the professional East German judiciary with lay judges trained in special schools for "people's judges." He has contributed to various actions taken to pervert East German justice, such as the transfer of penal administration to the police, the subordination of the courts to the executive, and the rewriting of the criminal code in the interests of the state.

He has been associated with the mass arrests that followed the 17 June riots, and with the subsequent announcement that the imprisoned demonstrators, with the exception of those "guilty of crimes", would be released.

The new Minister of Justice, Frau Benjamin, is a particularly vicious communist of long standing who is associated with some of the most infamous trials in postwar East Germany. A trained jurist, she was responsible for the sentences handed down during the notorious Waldheim trials in 1950, when thousands of persons who had been in concentration camps since the end of the war were indiscriminately sentenced to long prison terms to justify their incarceration. She also presided over a number of "show trials," particularly those of persons who were implicated in attempts to transfer assets to the West to avoid nationalization.

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Though the accusation of "activity hostile to the re-public" against Fechner can be interpreted in various ways, the two likely reasons for his downfall are:

1. He may have been selected as a scapegoat for the recent imprisonment of the 17 June demonstrators, in which case many could be released by the new minister. However, the appointment of Frau Benjamin would hardly convince the East German people that the administration of justice is to follow a softer line, particularly since her record of ruthlessness is well-known.
2. The ouster of Fechner may be the beginning of a purge of ex-socialists, including Grotewohl, who helped form the Socialist Unity Party in 1946. Such a move would probably indicate Soviet intentions to maintain in power the hard core of the East German communist party, including the strong man, Deputy Premier Ulbricht. The appointment of Frau Benjamin also suggests this possibility. The purge of ex-Socialists from the government would, however, not satisfy recent widespread popular demands for the ouster of the communist regime.

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